DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 339 RC 017 441

AUTHOR Voland, Maurice E.; Voland, Ellen L.
TITLE From the End of the World to the End of the Rainbow: The Engelhard Story.
PUB DATE Jul 89
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Anniversary Meeting of the Community Development Society (20th, St. Louis, MO, July 23-27, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *Community Action; Community Change; Community Characteristics; *Community Development; Community Programs; Economic Development; Rural Areas; *Rural Development; Tourism
IDENTIFIERS *North Carolina; *Small Towns

ABSTRACT

Engelhard is a very isolated rural community in Hyde County, North Carolina, economically dependent on seafood, small scale agriculture, and logging. In the mid-1980s the agricultural crisis, the decline in seafood landings, and changes in timber industry technology contributed to rising unemployment. Several decades of declining population and retail business closings had given the town an abandoned look. In 1986 local Rotary Club members formed the Engelhard Development Corporation (EDC) to seek solutions to the community's problems. At the same time, another group began work on restoration of a historic church (part of the largest rural Historic District in the country). A group of outside consultants created successful strategies for this second project and was then brought in on the economic development project. On the consultants' advice, EDC-generated funds by selling memberships, held a community meeting, and conducted a house-to-house survey of community attitudes and the nature of the local labor force. The resulting information became the basis for formation of task forces on jobs, recreation, beautification, and tourism. Backed by enthusiastic local support, these task forces proceeded to: (1) clean up the town; (2) hold successful annual Christmas parades and summer seafood festivals, which promoted tourism; and (3) organize a county softball league. Community pride has grown, there has been some increase in employment, and in 1988 Engelhard was a national winner in the "Take Pride in America" contest. (SV)

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by

Maurice E. Voland & Ellen L. Voland

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FROM THE END OF THE WORLD TO THE END OF THE RAINBOW: THE ENGELHARD STORY

Paper presented at the Community Development Society
20th Anniversary Meeting, July 23-27, 1989, St. Louis, Missouri

Maurice E. Voland & Ellen L. Voland
Horizon Associates, Inc.
P.O. Box 70
Belhaven, NC 27810

BACKGROUND

Located in the extreme eastern end of Hyde County, 50 miles from the nearest stop light and fast food restaurant, Engelhard, North Carolina represents a very isolated rural community. Surrounded on two sides by the Pamlico Sound, and by swamps on the remaining two sides, the economy of the county has historically been based on seafood, small scale agriculture, and logging. US Highway 264 hugs the coastline from the western edge to the northeastern corner of the county. Much of Highway 264 is built on some of the highest land in the county (as much as 5 feet above sea level!!) on the "ridge" that is the former shoreline of Lake Matamuskeet, the largest fresh water lake in North Carolina. The lake level has receded some 2 - 3 feet in modern times, allowing for relatively easy development of this elevated land by the original settlers. Lake Matamuskeet today is surrounded by the Matamuskeet wildlife refuge, a wintering location for many migratory water fowl including tundra swan, canada geese, and many species of ducks.

From the time of the earliest white settlements in the late 17th Century, the only contact with the outside world had been by water, until the 1930's when bridges and roads connected Hyde County, and the community of Engelhard, to the rest of the state. Like all communities in Hyde County, Engelhard is unincorporated; consequently, the County Commission is the only unit of local government. The 1980 Census showed slightly more than 5000 residents in Hyde County, with 1300 living in the greater Engelhard community in 1987.

When the dragline and bull dozer came into general use in the 1930's, it became possible to drain some of the swamps. Large scale row crop agriculture has replaced the diversified subsistance farms of the past. At this point, agriculture joined the seafood and timber industries as being exporters of their production to distant markets. Some of the feed grain production is moved out of the the Engelhard community by barge, while the remainder now moves by truck.

THE SITUATION

With the agricultural crisis of the mid 1980's, the decline in seafood landings, and changes in the technology associated with the timber industry, Engelhard was experiencing unemployment exceeding the national rate, and a higher rate of underemployment. Because of historic employment patterns, there were very few year around, wage labor, jobs available in the community. Most wage laborers had combined part time employment in timbering or land clearing with farm labor, or work in a seafood processing plant, or on one of the boats to provide what, in good years, was nearly full time employment. However, by the mid-1980's this was not as possible as it once had been.

The community identified as Engelhard encompasses an area immediately around the town site as well as the rural areas accessible by hard surfaced roads some 10 miles to the west, and northwest, along the northern and southern shores of Lake Matamuskeet. Prior to 1930, this Lake Landing area had supported a population that approached 5,000 -- currently the total county population. However, today the Engelhard community counts only a few more than 1300 residents, and many of these residents are experiencing hard times.

Beginning in the 1930's, a group of community leaders was active in linking this formerly isolated area to the larger world through lobbying the state capital for bridges and roads, as well as by their contacts with the markets for local production. They brought not only the roads, but electricity, telephone, and in the 1960's, public water to the residents. However, this group, augmented by a small cadre of returning WW II veterans, had either died, or was aging out of active community participation.

Several of this group were active in the local Rotary Club, and the Hyde County Historical Society. The Historical Society was successful in establishing the "Lake Landing Historic District" in preparation for the Bicentennial in 1976. There are some 400 historic structures located in the Historic District, making it the largest rural Historic District recognized by the National Register of Historic Places in the country.

Without a viable local government at the community level, much community business gets resolved at the local Rotary Club. It was in the summer of 1986 that several members of the Club recognized the need to do something about creating some new employment opportunities in the community. Further, they were concerned that there didn't seem to be a cadre of younger people coming along who would become the next generation of community leaders who would work in the best interests of the whole community.

With the decline in population since the 1930's, many of the former retail businesses in Engelhard had closed and the buildings had deteriorated, or had actually fallen down. There were junk cars, broken down farm equipment and buildings, accumulated litter, partially submerged abandoned boats in the harbor, and a mass of twisted metal from a collapsed grain bin at the local elevator littering the landscape. The Engelhard community just was not the kind of place anyone but the natives would want to come to. Even former residents who had migrated commented on the state of the landscape when they returned. Putting it mildly, any tourist coming through the Engelhard community could find all kinds of reasons not to stop! It just didn't appear that the community could be a hospitable one!!

Some of the members of the Rotary Club recalled that there had been a local economic development group active in the early 1960's. However, most of those members had died. They felt that a similar group should be constituted, and proceeded to identify nine relatively young (average age 40) local residents (one female, two black males, six white males) who represented different segments of the community. They gave this group a very loose "charter" to come together and "see if they could get some jobs here in Engelhard!" The group met several times during the summer and fall of 1986 and were making little progress, for they really did not know how to proceed.

In the early fall of 1986, one of the Engelhard Development Committee members, who had recently retired and moved back to the community after an absence of more than 30 years, was also concerned about how to "restore" the historic church of which he was a member. He and his wife who were in their mid 50's, and five older women, most well past 70, constituted the active congregation! This happened to be Amity United Methodist Church, which is a part of the five church Lake Landing Charge. The parsonage is adjacent to the Amity Church, so the minister is a resident of this neighborhood. Services are held in the Amity Church on the third Sunday of the month, with services being held in other churches on other Sundays. While the active Amity congregation is comprised of only 7 members, when services are held, the average attendance is about 40, which includes most of the active members of the other four churches in the Charge!

While logic would dictate that all but one of these church buildings be closed for economic reasons, each does anchor a community cemetery which provides a major incentive to keep them open. Further, the United Methodist Church has been reluctant to close local churches, unless requested to do so by the remaining active members. The North Carolina Department of Archives and History had done an architectual audit of the Amity Church and had developed a plan for its restoration, along with projected cost figures. It became apparent to the active members of Amity that it would not be possible for the seven of them to come up with the projected $60,000 for restoration. At this point, the Horizon Associates principals were asked to meet, as volunteers, with the Amity congregation to help them think through strategies that would allow them to restore their church building.

After an initial meeting, we suggested a series of strategies for identification of community residents who had moved elsewhere, and living relatives of those residing in the church cemetery. A letter was drafted and sent to the more than 250 names for which addresses had been found in the fall of 1986 explaining the desire to restore the Amity Church, and the difficulties faced by the 7 active members. By the end of 1986, more than $10,000 had been contributed to the restoration fund, and work commenced on the restoration of the Church. A series of other letters to this listing of some 250 families and individuals who had ties with Amity brought more than 250 to the first ever "Homecoming" for Amity Church. The visitors viewed the restoration in progress, and before the end of 1987, a total of more than $20,000 had been contributed, enough to complete the restoration using local craftsman who provided nearly all of the labor to do the job.

Because of the early success of the Amity project, Horizon Associates was also asked to meet with the Engelhard Economic Development Committee late in the fall of 1986. We met and listened to the committee members tell us of their hopes and dreams for Engelhard. They told us not only of their dreams, but of their frustrations. "We're at the end of the world, nobody cares about us." "They don't even know we exist in Swan Quarter (county seat) or in Raleigh (state capital)." We were able to utilize this information as the basis for developing a "proposal" for our assistance to them. This proposal, based on high community participation, was accepted but the committee would not "hire us" until they had funds. Someone recalled the 1960's economic development group and discovered a dormant bank account with some $250 in it. The committee met with the remaining members of the Board of Directors of the

earlier group, and were duly appointed to be the Board of Directors of a newly activated Engelhard Development Corporation with a very modest bank account! Throughout the remainder of the fall of 1986, the newly constituted Board of the EDC sold memberships to individuals ($10.00) and Businesses ($25) to generate the nest egg required to hire Horizon Associates to be their consultants.

By early 1987 enough funds had been generated to make it possible for us to start the project. The first task was to develop a "Community Profile" report to let Engelhard folks know about themselves, and to have available for people who might want to make an investment in the community. Board, and community members assisted with the development of the document which was made available for distribution at a "Community Meeting" in mid March. At the Community Meeting we asked the more than 100 participants, "What Are Your Dreams For Engelhard?" Utilizing small group techniques, everyone present had an opportunity to "have their say" and then to have their ideas shared with others present.

While there was a great turn-out for the Community Meeting (100+ people), it was recognized that there were nearly 1200 more who did not attend! A house-to-house community survey was then conducted in late March, utilizing volunteer interviewers trained by Horizon Associates Staff. All residents answered the questions, "What are your dreams for Engelhard", "The three things I like most about Engelhard are", and "If there were one thing I could change about Engelhard, what would it be!" A worker survey was also done at this time to determine the labor pool available so the EDC could have that information available to prospective employers.

The information from the March Community Meeting, and the Community Survey was utilized as the basis for the report, "Your Place To Grow: Engelhard, North Carolina". This report highlighted the four areas that had been most identified in the "dreams", and in the "wants" questions. They were: Jobs, Recreation, Beautification, and Tourism.

At a late May, 1987 Community Meeting the report was introduced and distributed. All in attendance were asked to select one of the four topical areas. They were joined by a representative from the Board of the Engelhard Development Corporation, resource persons from state agencies and private organizations, and a "Convening" Chair. The Board member and the Convening Chair, along with the resource people were to help the participants learn more about the resources available to help them solve their problems. Further, the Board representative and Convening Chair invited the interested parties to come to a later meeting and to become members of a working "Task Force" that would address their issue. Enthusiasm was high as reflected by comments like, "This is the best thing that's happened to Engelhard since they took our high school away back in 1963!!"

The EDC Board of Directors decided to retain the "Jobs" task force responsibilities for themselves. Active task force groups were formed in Recreation, Beautification, and Tourism. These groups soon became relatively autonomous, requiring only periodic stimulation, praise, or critique from Horizon Associates staff.

RESULTS

Since May of 1987 Horizon Associates staff has had only limited contact with the Board and the active Task Forces. We have been called in on occasion to critique plans, help think through procedures, and to participate in events that have come about as a result of these activities.

In addition to the EDC Board and the action Task Forces, a group of local businessmen decided to lend their support to these efforts, and took on the knotty job of stimulating "clean up" by some of their fellow business people and property owners. During the summer of 1987 so much was happening that the locals began to wonder if they were still living in Engelhard!! Several old structures were demolished, most all businesses painted, mounds of trash were removed, the grain elevator cleaned up the broken grain bin and its premises, roadside brush was cut and trash removed, and some folks even planted flowers around business places! By fall a new spirit was blowing through Engelhard - folks were beginning to realize that "we can do it!"

The Beautification Committee decided it was time to celebrate - so the "first ever" Engelhard Christmas Parade was held on the first Saturday of December, 1987! More than 45 units were in the parade, and some 1500 people were in attendance! It was a rousing success for the organizers, and for the spirit of local residents.

Even before the clean up had begun, the Recreation Task Force was hard at work. Until 1987 the County Commissioners had provided a small stipend to a teacher to organize and supervise a county soft ball league that played on the lighted field at the county high school. Funds were not to be available in 1987. The Recreation Task Force took over, obtained permission from the Board of Education to use the facilities at the High School, organized the leagues, supervised the play, sold pop and hot dogs from a borrowed trailer, and ended the season with enough profit to purchase their own "hot dog wagon" for the next season, and an additional amount to hire someone in 1988 to provide the "on site" supervision during the scheduled games.

The Tourism Task Force recognized that if they were to generate tourist interest in Engelhard, there needed to be some reason for folks to come! Along with the EDC Board, they conceived the first ever "Engelhard Seafood Festival" for May of 1987. The event drew the cooperation of the full business community for this Saturday event in mid May, and more than 3500 people came to eat locally caught seafood, visit with friends and neighbors, purchase goods from the local retail stores and vendors who had come for the day, and to participate in the planned athletic events, view the exhibits, and participate in the special activities for children.

Well, those are some of the big things, but lots of small things have happened, too! Local business people have expressed faith in their community by cleaning up and beautifying their business properties and buildings; several businesses have expanded; and there is an evidence of pride in what they have been able to accomplish!

As a result of working within the structure of the State Department of Transportation, it has been possible to move up a project to repave a portion of US Highway 264 near Engelhard and replace a bridge from 1993 to 1989. Since there are few public rest room facilities available in the area, the Department of Transportation has agreed to install a temporary "picnic area with rest room facilities" in downtown Engelhard (under construction on leased property in the summer of 1989) and to plan for a permanent, full service rest area in the Engelhard/Lake Landing community by the mid 1990's!

The Beautification Task Force has implemented a "Yard Of The Month" contest, and after sponsoring a countywide slogan contest, has placed attractive entrance signs at the west and north entrance to the Engelhard community.

One of the members of the original Engelhard Development Committee group has been elected to the County Commission representing her district. A county wide Chamber of Commerce is currently being formed as a result of the stimulation of Engelhard successes. However, the most satisfying result is seen on the faces of the residents of Engelhard! They just beam with pride in their community! They have discovered that they are sitting on a gold mine of resources right there in Engelhard! They may not have much money, but they have people who know how to get things done, people who know folks elsewhere who can get things done, and folks who are willing to make an investment in their community because they now see others doing so!

The second successful Christmas Parade was held in December of 1988, the second Seafood Festival in May of 1989, and all Task Forces and the Board of Directors of the Engelhard Development Corporation continue their active involvement in helping to make Engelhard a better place to live, work, and play.

While the EDC has not been successful in creating massive numbers of new jobs, there are more folks working more of the time, business people are optimistic about the future, and a new and cooperative wind seems to be blowing out of the county seat regarding government support for local initiatives. From the viewpoint of the consultant, we at Horizon Associates are "pleased as punch" with what has happened so far. The small intervention we made helped to stimulate a process that has now achieved a life of its own. What greater pride can a parent take than to see their child leave home and successfully compete in society!

Almost as a post script, the Beautification Task Force decided to submit an application to the North Carolina "Take Pride In America" contest in 1988. They used the theme "From The End Of The World To The End Of The Rainbow" for their report. They were named the winner in their category for North Carolina and their report was sent on to national competition. A recent telephone call received by the Task Force Chair announced they had been selected a national winner in their category and would be receiving an invitation to come to Washington D.C. to receive their award! Yes, Engelhard truly is at the "End Of The Rainbow!"